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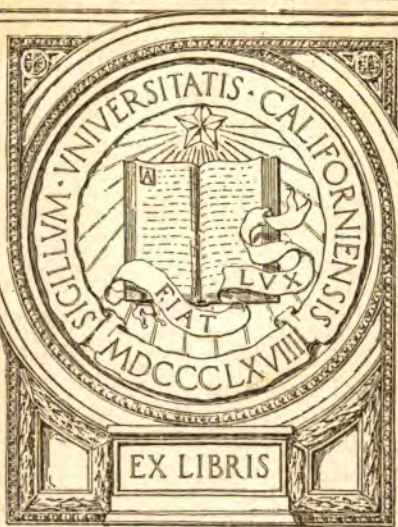
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No. 244

# THE GUTTER OF TIME

A Duologue in One Act

BY

ALFRED SUTRO

Author of "The Walls of Jericho," "A Marriage has been Arranged,"  
"Mollentrave on Women," etc., etc.

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# THE GUTTER OF TIME.

## THE GUTTER OF TIME.

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### CHARACTERS

Mrs. Transford ...	...	...
Sir Harry Jardine	...	...



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UNIT TO CLARIFY

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## THE GUTTER OF TIME.

3

**SCENE.**—The drawing-room of MRS. FRANKFORD'S flat in San Francisco. The garish and tasteless appointments are of the kind usually to be found in apartments that are let furnished. Endeavours have, however, been made, and not wholly without success, to tone down the prevailing vulgarity by means of a few good prints and photographs on the walls, a few pleasant draperies; on the small table, by the side of a china tea-service, stands a bowl filled with exquisite roses.

MRS. FRANKFORD is seated in a low wicker-chair, close to the little table, reading a paper-covered novel. She wears an exceedingly pretty tea-gown, cut rather low at the neck; and as she moves up and down bewildering frills and flounces rush tumultuously over her shoes. She is a very handsome woman—no longer young, but preserving admirably the semblance of youth. Her face, seen in profile, looks hard and stern; there are lines about the mouth and eyes that tell of much sorrow and bitterness; but her expression, when she is speaking and smiling, becomes exceedingly attractive.

The door opens, and SIR HARRY JARDINE enters. He is a very young man, almost a boy: tall, square-shouldered, vigorous, with a frank and pleasant face. MRS. FRANKFORD looks up, smiles, and holds out her hand, which he takes eagerly and presses in his.

MRS. FRANKFORD. How nice of you to come! I was so bored.

SIR HARRY. I hope you won't mind my inflicting myself upon you again—

MRS. T. Again? Oh, yes, you came yesterday, didn't you? And the day before! Well, I grant absolution. I've been reading a novel, and could not, for the life of me, feel the slightest interest in hero, heroine, or author. Sit down. You shall have some tea. Would you mind touching the bell? Thank you. What have you been doing to-day?

SIR H. (sitting) Oh—lounging about—

MRS. T. That must have been very difficult. America's a big place, but you have to go to the prairies if you want to lounge. Everyone's in a desperate hurry here—except in fiction. I've skimmed through two hundred pages of this book, but nothing has happened yet. And just think what happens in two hundred pages of our own life!

SIR H. If another person could read those pages, he wouldn't find them exciting perhaps.

MRS. T. That's true enough: and the first chapters are always dull. Tragic, too, in a way. We carry our fairy godmother in our pocket, and don't know it, and nobody tells us.

SIR H. If they did, we shouldn't believe it.

MRS. T. Oh, no, that's in the scheme of things. We were not meant to be happy, of course, so it was playfully contrived that we should be very foolish when we were young, and afterward acquire just sufficient wisdom to know what fools we have been. Would you mind touching that bell again? Our nigger's very dignified: he only comes at the second call.

SIR H. (*rings*) Don't you think we were meant to be happy?

MRS. T. Perhaps—as the twenty-storey houses here were meant to be beautiful—but they're not, are they? The architect no doubt has the best intentions—but there are so many interests to consider! Ah—here he comes.

*A black servant enters, with a kettle; he pours the water into the little teapot on the table.*

Water boiling, Tom?

TOM. Yes, missis, sure. (*he goes.*)

MRS. T. (*peering into the teapot*) It probably isn't, you know. The chief moral distinction between the black and the white is that the former will lie for the mere pleasure of lying. Now I don't think we do. We lie under protest, and, very often, would rather tell the truth.

SIR H. Why do you say such things? I am sure you always tell the truth.

MRS. T. I do to some people, of course. It's a luxury, and one feels frightfully extravagant. You have been here every day this week: I shall have to economise severely for the next month or two. (*she pours out the tea, hands HARRY a cup, and tastes her own*) No, as I thought—the water was not boiling.

SIR H. (*drinking*) It's very good tea.

MRS. T. The tea's all right—but if Providence will let the water be tepid—

SIR H. I'd drink ditch-water with relish, if you poured it out for me.

MRS. T. (*smiling*) You say these things very glibly—I suppose you've said them very often before?

SIR H. You know better than that. I'm not that sort of man. I'm by way of being athletic, you know. I took my blue at the 'Varsity.

MRS. T. Oh, really? Cricket?

SIR H. Yes: and I'm fond of all sport. Well, that keeps you from being a ladies' man.

MRS. T. (*dreamily*) I should like to see the match at Lord's again. . . .

SIR H. You haven't been home for a long time?

MRS. T. It's rather pretty of you to talk of England as my home. No, not for a great many years.

SIR H. And are you never home-sick?

MRS. T. Home-sick, heart-sick, sick of everything except the sea, which is beautifully clean and deep. I'm a great swimmer, you know.

SIR H. Are you, though? I do a bit that way myself.

MRS. T. We'll go for a swim together some day, perhaps. It's my one happy time. There's no nonsense about the sea. Leave off swimming, it says to you: just fold your arms and cross your legs, and I'll do the rest. I let myself go down sometimes—down, down, down—and there's a great green wall round you, and you're a million miles from the earth—and then suddenly your heart goes thumping, and you're deliciously afraid: and you throw up your hands and rise—oh, so slowly, so slowly!—and at last, with a bubble and splash, you get to the surface, and draw a long breath; and the sun's shining on you, and people are near—and you feel that the sea's rather angry—it wanted to keep you. Oh, it's great!

SIR H. That's strange. I've never felt like that.

MRS. T. You don't see the angel on the waves; you don't play hide-and-seek with death.

SIR H. Why should you?

MRS. T. Why, indeed? But tell me about yourself. Do you shoot?

SIR H. Rather. I don't care for pheasants, you know, and that kind of thing—I like big game, where the beast has a chance. I used to think that was the chief joy in life.

MRS. T. And now?

SIR H. Now I would rather be with you. . . .

*Having blurted this out, he blushes furiously. An enigmatic smile comes over MRS. TRANSFORD'S face; she looks quietly at him.*

Please forgive my having said that. I didn't mean to—it slipped out.

MRS. T. You are forgiven.

SIR H. I—I—you see I've had rather a strange sort of life; I've met very few women. My father died when I

was a baby; and my mother never got over it—they hadn't been married two years—

Mrs. T. You are the only child?

Sir H. Yes. And my mother shut herself up. She saw very few people.

Mrs. T. Lady Jardine must be quite young!

Sir H. (with a laugh) Oh, well, the dear old lady's about forty-two, I suppose—

Mrs. T. (her colour deepening for an instant) Ah. And very devoted to you?

Sir H. Oh, yes. This trip of mine was rather a blow to her—but she insisted upon it—

Mrs. T. You've been away a long time!

Sir H. About a year. I had six months' shooting in India.

Mrs. T. The Anglo-Indian ladies are very fascinating, are they not?

Sir H. I suppose so—but they didn't fascinate me. I prefer tigers.

Mrs. T. Well, you must have had a very good time.

Sir H. Oh, yes. I've been almost everywhere—but I like San Francisco best.

Mrs. T. It's a very beautiful city.

Sir H. I wasn't thinking of the city.

Mrs. T. Ah, of course, you admire the bay. Most Englishmen fall in love with the Pacific at their first sight of it. Tell me, have you seen my husband to-day?

Sir H. Yes—at the Club. He asked me to dine here to-morrow.

Mrs. T. Ah,—What was he doing at the Club?

Sir H. Playing piquet with young Darley.

Mrs. T. Darley?

Sir H. The young fellow who was here at dinner the other night.

Mrs. T. Oh, yes, I remember. His father's enormously rich. I suppose my husband was winning?

Sir H. Rather. He had a pile of gold in front of him.

Mrs. T. Then he'll be in a good temper to-night. Has he won much of you?

Sir H. Oh, just a bit. I've had very bad luck, you know.

Mrs. T. (quietly) Most people do have bad luck when they play with my husband.

Sir H. (startled) Mrs. Transford! What do you mean?

Mrs. T. Merely that he is an exceedingly good player, and that most young men are not.—Are you?

Sir H. Oh, I hate cards.

Mrs. E. Then why do you play? (SIR HARRY bites his lips, blushes, and cannot find an answer.)

Mrs. T. (looking steadily at him) Why?

SIR H. (fidgeting) Oh, well— I don't know.

Mrs. T. You think that if you didn't play cards with the husband, you would not be allowed to come here and flirt with the wife?

SIR H. (starting to his feet in dismay) Oh, Mrs. Transford, how awfully unkind!

Mrs. T. Sit down, sit down. But isn't it true?

SIR H. (stammering) I—

Mrs. T. Have you any friends in San Francisco? I mean people to whom you have letters?

SIR H. I haven't presented my letters.

Mrs. T. You have gone to your banker's?

SIR H. Yes.

Mrs. T. And he certainly asked you to dinner?

SIR H. (very uncomfortable) Er—yes. I wish you wouldn't—

Mrs. T. And in the course of conversation he will have learned that you were intimate with the Transfords. And he will have told you that the husband was a man of no private means and no occupation; once a popular actor, but who had been compelled to give up his profession owing to his having on two occasions been intoxicated on the stage. And that he now earned a very handsome living by playing cards with strangers—like you. Didn't he tell you this?

SIR H. (very unhappy) Oh,—er—

Mrs. T. Did he, or did he not?

SIR H. He did.

Mrs. T. That's honest. But he said more than that?

SIR H. Really, Mrs. Transford!

Mrs. T. He also told you that the wife was of material assistance to the husband, as she was very kind to the young men whose money he won.

SIR H. (hotly) And I said it was a lie.

Mrs. T. My dear friend, I hope you didn't put it quite so bluntly.

SIR H. I did, though; and I got up, and left the house.

Mrs. T. (serenely) You owe that respectable banker an apology.

SIR H. Mrs. Transford!

Mrs. T. What he said was perfectly true.

SIR H. (in dismay) True!

Mrs. T. Our establishment is expensive; the money all comes from young men like yourself. San Francisco in

the season—the watering-places, and so forth. Don't look so scared. You may smoke, if you wish to.

SIR H. Mrs. Transford!

MRS. T. My dear Harry—if you will allow me to call you Harry—I don't want you to think too badly of me either. Mr. Transford is not in the very least jealous; but my relations with his youthful friends are . . . strictly platonic.

SIR H. (*colouring*) There was no need to assure me of that.

MRS. T. They come here and flirt with me—as you do; they tell me how glad they are to be with me—as you do; and they end up by making love to me, as you were about to do, if I hadn't stopped you.

SIR H. (*steadily*) I don't think I am quite like the others.

MRS. T. No: you are a very dear boy. And I assure you I have never told the "others" what I have told you. I flirt with them to their hearts' content—I let them tell me they love me till they're tired. And then they go, and make room for the next one.

SIR H. And why have you treated me differently?

MRS. T. Because I . . . like you.

SIR H. (*seizing her hand*) Mrs. Transford!

MRS. T. (*giving his hand a friendly squeeze and withdrawing hers*) I am not a bad sort, you know. Your banker would not believe it, but I really am not. Life is a sorry business, but it has to be lived; and a poor devil like me can't afford to be nice as regards ways and means. A woman, you see, is very much handicapped. A man may retrieve a false step—but she—never!

SIR H. A false step—You!

MRS. T. (*after a moment's pause*) Tell me, Harry, have you ever met Lord Winthorpe in London?

SIR H. Yes: he belongs to my club. They say he's great on astronomy.

MRS. T. (*drily*) Very. And how is he?

SIR H. Oh, all right, I should think. He's a dry old stick.

MRS. T. (*rocking herself*) I once had the honour of being that old stick's wife.

SIR H. (*with a violent start*) What!!

MRS. T. Yes. You see I, also, lost my father when I was a baby; I also was an only child; but it was not my fortune to have a devoted mother. Mine was exceedingly frivolous: and I saw her but seldom. My life was divided



between school and the nursery. When I was eighteen she married me to Lord Winthorpe.

SIR H. She married you?

MRS. T. She looked very young, you see; and the society of a grown-up daughter could not be agreeable. So she kept me at home. I had inherited a great deal of her frivolity; and my life was so dull that, in my eagerness to escape, I married the first man who asked me. He chanced to be Lord Winthorpe.

SIR H. And you weren't happy?

MRS. T. I was eighteen, he forty. I craved for society and amusement; his one delight was to look at the moon through a very long telescope. I had no children—a child might have saved me.

SIR H. Oh, I am so sorry!

MRS. T. And after three years I ran away—with Mr. Transford, the actor. (SIR HARRY *buries his face in his hands*) It made quite a little sensation at the time. I was what was called, in those days, a professional beauty. My photograph was in all the shop-windows. It sold, I believe, very freely—the price was only a shilling. I was giddy, flighty, and inconceivably foolish. But I had kept straight so far, and there is some merit in that, when one's husband's an astronomer. I met Mr. Transford, who made violent love to me. The women of my set all raved about him—there wasn't a grain of sense in the lot of us. He was certainly very good-looking. And I was only a doll. I had no friend to speak to me as I have spoken to you. "The world well lost for love" was my text. Mr. Transford and I went off together the night my husband discovered a new star, which was, I believe, about the size of the Isle of Wight. Don't you think it was very clever to discover so small a star?

SIR H. (*without raising his head*) Oh, Mrs. Transford, Mrs. Transford!

MRS. T. I'm afraid I've made you unhappy. Don't let this distress you. Shall I go on?

SIR H. Yes.

MRS. T. He took me to the South of France, and at first I was vaguely flattered and pleased. I had grown so tired of the moon! But that didn't last long. I had a little money of my own—that didn't last long either.

SIR H. Do you mean to say that Mr. Transford—

MRS. T. Not a penny, of course, after he had paid for the tickets. But they were very expensive. And so, when our money was nearly exhausted, we shipped ourselves off to New York. I fancy we both felt we had made a mistake.

SIR H. Didn't he love you?

MRS. T. He? There are always footlights in an actor's soul, you know.—Well, about three weeks after I had left him, it occurred to Lord Winthorpe that he hadn't seen me for a day or two. So he made inquiries. And then, in an absent-minded moment, he sent for his lawyer. The lawyer procured a divorce, of which I was duly notified. And I discovered that Mr. Transford had been absent-minded too—he had a wife in a lunatic asylum, who, by the way, is still living, and is still in that asylum.

SIR H. (*furiously*) What a villain!

MRS. T. Oh, no—it all meant so little to him! Women adored him—they are such fools—wherever he went; but then, as I said, he was very good-looking, and his manners were charming. Well, he got an engagement as star in New York; his elopement with a lady of title had made him more fashionable than ever. I was popular, too, with a certain set; but I was very unhappy. The Lord shed real human tears. But, with your permission, I will draw a veil over a very long period, during which we wandered from New York to Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, Australia, Canada, Africa—birds of passage, at home nowhere—Mr. Transford acting and I yawning, he making love to every woman he met, while I—we will draw that veil.

SIR H. (*sorrowfully*) I had no idea—

MRS. T. Mr. Transford, after a time, became attached to a strong and rather insidious liqueur. One night there was a scene on the stage—it was hushed up; another, and his career as an actor was over. He had always been a good card-player; and for the last three years he has turned cards, and me, to account. . . . There, my dear Harry, you have the true and moving story of Helen Maddison, sometime the Countess of Winthorpe, now the nameless person who lives with Mr. Hamilton Transford, and helps him to rock his young friends.—I'm sure you would like to smoke. There's a box by your elbow.

SIR HARRY, *white to the lips, passes the box; she takes a couple of cigarettes and hands one to him; he accepts it mechanically.*

Will you give me a light?

*He strikes a match, and holds it while she lights her cigarette.*

You are not smoking.

SIR H. I don't want to.

MRS. T. Smoke, my dear friend, smoke. It soothes the nerves, and points a moral, where the moral is needed.

*She strikes a match, and hands it to him; he takes it, but lets it burn to the end and throws it down. Mrs. TRANSFORD, leaning back, her eyes fixed on the ceiling, puffs blue rings of smoke into the air.*

Well, I have told you, and am glad to have done it. The story isn't a pretty one, is it? But you know what you have to do. You will not come to dinner to-morrow; you will not play cards any more with Mr. Transford. . . . We two will say good-bye to-day.

SIR H. (*doggishly*). No.

MRS. T. My dear boy, it's sweet of you to say no; but you must. This house is not a fit place for a young and impressionable English baronet. You will leave San Francisco at once.

SIR H. I ask you to be my wife.

*Mrs. TRANSFORD gives a start of utter surprise; she turns and stares wonderingly at him.*

You are divorced from Lord Whitcombe; you are not married to Mr. Transford. I ask you to be my wife.

*Lights gleam in her eyes, her lips tremble, hot blood courses over her face.*

I love you. I have never loved a woman in my life before. I never shall again. I loved you the first time I saw you. Will you be my wife, Helen?

*He takes both her hands in his; her breath comes very quickly—she still cannot speak.*

I will try to make you happy. Oh, I love you! Can you care for me a little?

*His face is very near hers, and approaches still nearer; she frees herself gently, and turns round in her chair, away from him.*

(*Rising and going to her*) Helen!

MRS. T. Wait. wait. . . . Sit down—wait. . . . Oh, this is very strange!

SIR H. Why strange? Didn't you know that I loved you?

MRS. T. I told you my story because . . . I liked you so much . . . because I . . . I . . .

SIR H. (*anxiously*) O Helen, I want you to do more than like me!

MRS. T. I do. That was why I told you.

SIR HARRY gives a glad cry and rushes eagerly to her; she waves him back.

No, no . . . the fact is . . . well, why should I not say it? Yes—I love you. I felt strangely drawn towards you the first time you came. I love you for the frank, noble boy that you are. For the faith in me, your unquestioning belief in all I have told you. And I swear to you, Harry, by . . . all the bitter tears I have shed . . . that every word . . . is true.

SIR H. Don't you think I know?

MRS. T. Ah, you have tempted me, tempted me sorely! I had not a suspicion. I thought you would take your hat, and go.

SIR H. You thought that of me?

MRS. T. Why not? It would have been so natural. And you ask me to marry you! Oh, Harry, where should we go, you and I, when we were married?

SIR H. Somewhere away from people who know us. We will begin a new life. I will make you happy, Helen.

MRS. T. (*holding out her hand, which he kisses eagerly*) Dear Harry! It would be very beautiful. Love—for me! Oh, the temptation! Love! After the solitude, the dreariness, the squalor—the card-playing and quarrelling—to have a man by your side who loves you. . . . Love . . . Love! . . . (*she suddenly turns, shakes herself, and gives a queer little laugh*) My cigarette has gone out, Harry. Please give me another.

SIR H. (*refusing to release her hand*) You have not yet said yes.

MRS. T. (*with a wan smile*) How old are you, Harry?

SIR H. (*after a moment's pause, somewhat defiantly*) I shall be twenty-five, very soon. But I have managed my own affairs for a long time, you know.

MRS. T. And . . . how old am I?

SIR H. About thirty, perhaps.

MRS. T. (*sadly*) I am thirty-six. Mr. Transford and I have been . . . together . . . for fourteen years.

SIR H. Do you think that makes any difference to me? You are young, you are beautiful—

MRS. T. I take a very long time dressing in the morning. . . . But never mind about that. I have still a few years before me. For those few years we might be happy—

SIR H. We shall always be happy, Helen.

MRS. T. Always—ah, always! And your mother, Harry? Tell me, would she be pleased . . . with her daughter-in-law? (*SIR HARRY is silent.*) Well?

SIR H. No. But she is not a conventional woman. She has only to see you—

Mrs. T. You think that? She has only to see me! Well—I tell you—I have reached a stage of such absolute wretchedness, the future is so horrible, life so appalling, that—if I did not love you—I would marry you without hesitation.

SIR H. (*bewildered*) If you did not love me!

Mrs. T. Yes. These fourteen years have been years of such pain: I have known so much sorrow, been dealt with so hardly, that I would seize any rope that was flung me. If any other rich man had asked me, I should probably have answered "Yes." But not to you! I can't to you!

SIR H. Oh, you are cruel!

Mrs. T. I can't say it to you. Because I love you. It is absurd for a woman to love a man so many years younger than she. But I do. I do.

*She draws him to her, and kisses him very tenderly on the lips and eyes. He falls on his knees before her.*

Oh, my dear, my dear, in a very few years my hair will be turning grey, the lines on my face will show more and more clearly; age will be written upon me. And you will still be quite young. And, Harry, I should have no children, and you would want children. And the poor mother at home would break her heart, for to her, and to all the world, I should be an adventuress. Oh, this offer of yours, your faith and your love, are so precious, so splendid, that I shall hug them to me for the rest of my life. You see, I am sorely tempted: and I refuse, for your dear sake. And, in the days to come, when the darkness upon me is darker still, there will be comfort in knowing that I saved you, saved you from me. You will go home, you will soon forget me; dear boy, you are twenty-four; but I shall remember, for I am too old to forget. And, Harry, perhaps you have not placed your love so very unworthily after all, for the woman you love has enough love for you to refuse to drag you down with her. Oh, dear boy, don't say any more. My life is ended; yours begins. There is no hope for me, no to-morrow. When I cease to attract, Mr. Transford will send me away.

SIR HARRY *growls and springs to his feet.*

(*Gently stroking his hand*) But I promise you that whenever I want a friend I will write to you. I have your address, I will write. So far, I have not had a friend in the world. I promise you that. And the future will not be quite hopeless, after all.

## THE OUTLET OF TIME.

SIR H. (heavily) You will not marry me?

MRS. T. No, dear boy, I will not. I was very near saying yes. Oh, very near. Remember it, in the days to come, when you are happy with your wife and children at home—that the desolate creature in San Francisco was very near saying yes.

SIR H. (passionately) You know that you're frightfully cruel? You talk of your age and the rest—what do these things matter to me? I love you. I am young, of course—but do you think that I ever will change? That I can forget you, or care for anyone else? Helen, Helen, don't send me away!

MRS. T. Hush, hush! Don't say any more. Why do I refuse, do you think? Because I know something of life, of the world, of men and women. If I said yet I should be like my husband, playing a game that I understand well with a mere beginner. You don't respect my husband, do you? Very soon you would not respect me.

SIR H. Helen!

MRS. T. I should be your wife, but the years would divide us. And wherever we went we should meet people who knew. There is no place in this world where one can hide. Good-bye, dear Harry. Leave San Francisco to-night. Go home. You must do as I tell you.

SIR H. (the tears standing in his eyes, holding out his hands to her) Helen!

MRS. T. (putting both her hands in his) Good-bye, my dear one, good-bye. Oh, I am so grateful to you. Good-bye. And God bless you, Harry.

*She kisses him again, slowly, tenderly, fondly; then suddenly breaks away, goes to the table, and rings.*

*SIR HARRY moves eagerly towards her; the door opens, and the negro enters.*

Good-bye, Sir Harry.

*With one last look at her he goes, with the negro at his heels. MRS. TRANSFORD'S eyes follow him till the door closes; she heaves a deep sigh, another, and for an instant, puts her handkerchief to her eyes. Then she takes a cigarette from the box, lights it, throws herself into the rocking-chair, and rocks up and down.*

CURTAIN.

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